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ABSTRACT

Each year in the United States, thousands of school-aged children become involved in sexual activities arranged by adults for purposes of pleasure and profit. Nationwide, annual profits from the child pornography industry and from female and male child prostitution are in the tens of millions of dollars. Heretofore, the majority of child-care-givers have been largely unmindful of the problems of childhood sexual exploitation and its educational and sociological concomitants. An overview of the problem of child sexual abuse is provided. Measures are recommended which can assist professional educators in responding to the needs of child victims and to the concerns of high-risk individuals. (Author)

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School-Aged Victims of Sexual Abuse: Implications for Educators

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Paper presented at the 1979 conference of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, New York, NY

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When six-year-old Nikki's sore throat did not heal over a period of two weeks, the school nurse referred the young first-grader to a local physician. The examination by the pediatrician revealed that Nikki was suffering from an infection of gonorrhea in the mouth and throat. Following the ensuing investigation, law enforcement officials arrested Nikki's father whose subsequent testimony disclosed that he had engaged in sexual relations with Nikki since she was two years old.

Eleven-year-old JoAnn's lethargic attitude and prolific truancy prompted school officials to request an investigation into the matter by the school guidance counselor. Several written requests for a visit with JoAnn's parents went unanswered, and JoAnn's absenteeism continued unabated. When the guidance counselor visited the home unannounced he pursuaded JoAnn and her mother to talk with him. The discussion proved to be a cathartic event as it was disclosed that since the age of nine, JoAnn had been sexually molested by a number of adult males; she had as well been the object of continuing incestuous relations with her father and an older brother since that time.

Charles seldom attended school, and when he was in attendance, he disrupted routines with his aggressive behavior and abusive language. The school psychologist traced the eighth-grader's incorrigibility to an unsupportive home situation--complicated by the fact that Charles had been maintaining a sizable drug habit and a penchant for coercive mates by earning as much as $200 a night as a male prostitute.

These are not isolated cases reflecting uncommon instances of societal depravity. These three cases are representative of thousands just like them that take place in our country each year.

One dimension of the child sexual abuse problem, the pornography industry, is a billion dollar business annually, and about 10% of the market involves school-aged (and preschool) children. Many of the more than 260 different pornographic publications contain photographs depicting young children participating in every imaginable sexual event--alone, with agemates, or with adults. In testimony before the House Subcommittee on Select Education in May, 1977, New York Congressman Mario Biaggi reported that the child porno industry has invaded the lives of over 300,000 children nationally--children as young as three years of age.

Before that same committee, Daryl F. Gates (1977), Assistant Police Chief, Los Angeles Police Department, testified that there were an estimated 30,000 teenage prostitutes in Los Angeles. Robin (1976) has estimated that there may be as many as 300,000 boys involved in activities associated with sex for sale. Densen-Gerber (1977) conservatively estimates that at least 1.2 million children are involved in some type of sexual activity for money, with at least 120,000 in the New York metropolitan area alone.

The number of reported cases of intra-familial incest is increasing dramatically. Henry Giaretto, director of the Santa Clara County (California) Child Sexual Abuse Treatment Program reported before the House Subcommittee that the number of families treated by his program in one year had increased from thirty several years ago, to over 600 families a year in 1977.

Referring to the results of a study he conducted involving 1200 college-age females, Gagnon (1965) disclosed that 26% of the subjects surveyed reported having had a sexual experience with an adult before the victim had reached the age of thirteen. Kinsey (1953) found that

from 20-24% of the females in his study had been sexually molested as children. Ten percent of rape victims treated at Central Emergency Hospital (San Francisco) were reported by Queens Bench Foundation (1975) as being under the age of thirteen. These figures are even more noteworthy in light of San Francisco District Attorney Joseph Freitas' (1977) estimate that less than 50% of all sexual molestations are ever reported due to the stigma attached and out of fearfulness of being punished.

Child victims of sexual abuse live an improbable existence--at once confusing, sordid, and bizarre. In their bewilderment and uncertainty about what is happening to them, young victims become guilt-ridden, bitter, and scared. They quickly acquire a kind of twisted sophistication with respect to matters of interpersonal intimacy. In traumatic fashion, their innocence is shattered, and they assume their places in our classroom in need of much support which we as teachers are, in many respects, woefully unprepared through training to provide. Through our involvement in our schools with victims of sexual abuse, there are some things to which we might apply ourselves on behalf of these youngsters who view the future with such desperation.

Surveillance

Child molesters are frequently found patrolling areas where children congregate--schools, playgrounds, parks, etc. They will often gravitate toward positions as volunteers with organizations serving children. All suspicious persons should be carefully observed; and if the situation warrants it, they should be reported to the appropriate authorities. Children should be reminded to avoid the advances of strangers; and they should be encouraged to report the activities of suspicious persons.

Signs of sexual abuse per se are seldom noticeable to the casual observer. Unless the victim himself reports incidents of abuse, only disclosure by those close to the participants, or discovery through physical examination will reveal this kind of abuse. There are no specific behavioral signs which suggest sexual abuse. Some victims become noticeably despondent and excessively withdrawn, while others have been known to brag about their participation in sexually exploitative episodes.

Appearances that the child is a self-determining participant in such activity are deceptive. When the victims become mindful of the ultimate social and emotional consequences of their involvement, they realize that it has been a very costly and regrettable experience for them.

Effective comprehensive relief for the victim can be obtained only after the abusive episodes are reported to the proper legal and child/family support agencies. Educators can learn to be discriminating observers of possible signs of abuse by being alert for combinations of some of the following signs of possible trouble observable in the child:

- aggressive, disruptive or destructive acting-out.
- shy, withdrawn, passive, or overly compliant behavior.
- habitual truancy or chronic tardiness without adequate excuse.
- sexual precosciousness.
- coming to school much too early or handing around school after dismissal.
- appearing to be in need of frequent medical attention.
- child complains of maltreatment.
- behavior of child's parents is bizarre. They may be aggressive, abusive, or apathetic when approached about problems. They

express little concern for the child.

- unexplainable, noticeably subnormal school work.

Upon hearing compliants or receiving evidence of abuse (or otherwise suspecting abusive treatment), the educator is obligated by law in most states to report it to legal authorities. Likewise, the law protects from legal suit, those who report their suspicions with good intent.

Preventative and Responsive Education

For their own safety, there are a number of things children can do to minimize their chances of becoming sexually molested. Some of the following suggestions should be the topics of thorough discussion in our classrooms:

- Learn to identify behavior that is suspicious:

  a. loitering
  b. attempting physical contact
  c. initiating sexually aggressive conversation
  d. requesting child accompaniment
  e. enticeing with money or gifts.

- Be alert to the conditions of individuals that may precipitate aggression:

  a. intoxication
  b. anger
  c. behavior influenced by drugs.

- Avoid any form of contact with suspicious persons.

- Do not play alone or in areas that are abandoned.

- Be especially careful after dark--playing or commuting.

- When alone, assume a defensive posture at all times--be skeptical.

- Refrain from behaving licentiously or dressing suggestibly.

- Learn precautionary measures to use in the event of improper advances by a stranger:

  a. do not talk to the suspect.
  b. move in a direction opposite that of a suspect traveling in an automobile.

c. go directly to the nearest place of refuge (a store, private dwelling, restaurant or tavern, a gathered crowd, etc.).
d. report the incident at once.

In many instances (especially with respect to cases of intra-familial incest), the adult suspect will be someone known to the victim. In such cases, close contact with the adult perpetrator may be unavoidable, particularly for younger children. Coercive incestuous episodes are particularly devastating, because the victims feel singularly helpless--trapped in a situation out of which they perceive there to be no effective escape. We must assure the children in our schools that we are fully prepared to provide whatever assistance is necessary in order to protect them from physical or emotional duress--whatever the source.

Child victims of sexual abuse are clearly in need of Individual Education Programs (IEP's) prescribed with as much sensitivity as those developed for students with other forms of exceptionality. Many of these children will need a lot of help with clarifying values, with creating appropriate bases for productive interpersonal relations, and with identifying positive dimensions for assessing self-worth. Once we are successful in generating meaningful experiences on these terms, we can expect more to be forthcoming in terms of academic achievement.

As we caution students about possible threats to their well-being, we must also demonstrate to them our willingness and ability to shelter them or otherwise assist them in finding viable alternatives to the lifestyles they currently may be finding intolerable. This same service we could publicize to all our children's families. At the very least we, as educators, can listen to the concerns of those at risk; and from there, help them to locate appropriate community sources of family support services.

School Guidance Services

Few school systems in our country have numbers of guidance counselors and psychologists enough to adequately serve the many children who are in need of their services. To say that more counselors and psychologists are needed is an understatement. Until this shortage can be remediated, a system must be devised for prioritizing the cases reviewed by these professionals. High-risk students might be afforded some preference ahead of some who are in need primarily of vocational or academic counseling.

Like most other school professionals, counselors and psychologists are not fully mindful of the problems of sexual abuse. School counselors and psychologists must begin receiving inservice assistance in the application of techniques for responding to the needs of sexual abuse victims. Among more pressing goals of a student-victim assistance program which could emerge are consideration for such constructs as:

- understanding and synthesizing the student victim's feelings and attitudes about himself and others.
- helping the student begin to understand the special nature of his experiences, and helping him formulate a basis for securing satisfying patterns of interpersonal relations.
- reintegrating the student into curricular and co-curricular activities shared by the other students in the school or in alternative learning environments.

Influencing Legislation

Educators can raise the consciousness of the parents of the children in their schools about the problem of sexual abuse. School officials and parents together can write to their legislators and encourage passage of legislation which will deal more effectively with suspects who exploit children sexually. Presently, less than three-

fourths of our states have laws specifically prohibiting the participation of minors in an obscene performance which could be harmful to them.

There is likewise a paucity of legislation at the federal level. There are no federal statutes specifically regulating the distribution of sexual materials to children. In February, 1978, President Carter signed into law, a bill which specifically regulates or restricts the interstate distribution of obscene materials (P.L.95-225 S.1585 - Protection of Children Against Sexual Exploitation Act of 1977). But this statute only narrowly responds to the total problem of childhood sexual exploitation. Continued pressure on state and federal legislators for passage of legislation which will help law enforcement and social service agencies deal more effectively with problems of sexual abuse must be forthcoming. Educators and parents can be a viable force in this respect by unifying their efforts on behalf of the children they serve.

Communal Responsiveness

School officials should consider establishing cooperative relations with representatives of other community agencies for the purpose of addressing problems of childhood sexual abuse with a multi-disciplinary approach along the lines of the Child Trauma Intervention program developed by the Western Regional Center for Education and Research under the direction of Dr. Morris J. Paulson. Paulson (1975) describes the program as an interdisciplinary approach which emphasizes a close working relationship between community-based treatment and intervention programs, law enforcement agencies, and elements of the judicial system.

In many communities it could be possible for educational authorities to join forces with law enforcement agencies, family service

agencies, and other advocates of family welfare for purposes of co-ordinating public information services, child and family counseling services, identification of high-risk individuals, and planning and implementing programs for treatment of victims of sexual abuse. A help-line communication system run by volunteers could be established which would enable high-risk individuals to express their needs with assured confidentiality. Callers-in could receive advice, information, and answers to their questions--as well as having an opportunity to talk to someone who will listen to them without threatening them.

Teachers as Models

Children who have been exploited sexually have in common a continuing history of contacts with adults who were unsupportive, exploitive, and dishonest. In matters pertaining to all forms of child abuse, teachers can significantly advance the imperatives of childhood advocacy by presenting themselves as positive models of adulthood. Children need to experience relations with adults which are supportive, understanding, and unpretentious. They need interactions with grownups which engender respects and trust.

The process for the establishment of trust between child victim and adult may be laboriously slow. We must prove ourselves to victims of sexual abuse by demonstrating to them over and over again that their value as individuals is measured in terms that transcend the worth of their bodies or their capacity for generating sexual gratification in others. In the classroom we must prescribe programs for individual growth which make allowances for the unique history which has devastated the lives of these young people. How we respond to these students--the kinds

of decisions we make in our classrooms and how we make those decisions--will help determine in the long run how successful teachers can be in helping victims of child abuse establish meaningful and growth-producing relationships with the adults around them.

Coda

Children have a right to experience a fully integrated childhood of innocence. As adults we are no more entitled to impair our children's rights than we are to take our children's lives. As individuals we can make ourselves more readily available as friends to those children who search desperately for a redeeming relationship with a grown person. As childhood advocates we must promote more actively those things which impart decency to a child's existence. Likewise, we must cry out more vocally and more urgently against threats to decency. As educators we must more wholeheartedly embrace young victims of sexual abuse, and make sanctuaries of our classrooms--places where the students entrusted to us can take refuge and learn to become all that they are capable of becoming as individuals.

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